

Message Text

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ACTION EA-14

INFO OCT-01 EUR-25 ADP-00 IO-12 DPW-01 AID-20 CIAE-00

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RSC-01 PRS-01 SS-15 USIA-12 RSR-01 /138 W

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R 251105 Z MAY 73

FM AMEMBASSY SAIGON

TO SECSTATE WASHDC 2217

INFO AMEMBASSY BANGKOK

AMEMBASSY BUDAPEST

AMCONSUL HONG KONG

AMEMBASSY JAKARTA

AMEMBASSY OTTAWA

AMEMBASSY PHNOM PENH

AMEMBASSY VIENTIANE

AMEMBASSY WARSAW

USDEL JEC PARIS

CINCPAC

USDAO SAIGON

USSAG NKP TRAFB

AMCONSUL BIEN HOA

C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 1 OF 2 SAIGON 9286

E. O. 11652 GDS

TAGS MARR SX PINS, PINT PINR ECON VS

SUBJECT IMPRESSIONS OF LOC NINH AREA

REF: SAIGON 9183 (NOTAL)

SUMMARY

ON MAY 23 VOA CORRESPONDENT PETER COLLINS AND TWO OTHER MEDIA REPRESENTATIVES ACCOMPANIED AN ICCS INVESTIGATION TEAM TO COMMUNIST- CONTROLLED LOC NINH AREA. COLLINS EXPRESSED SURPRISE THAT THERE WERE SO FEW PEOPLE IN THE AREA AND SAID THAT HE FOUND THE LOCAL ECONOMY IN AN ADVANCED STATE OF DECAY. HE SAID THAT THE COMMUNISTS HAD MADE NO APPARENT EFFORT
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EITHER TO POLITICIZE THE MASSES OR TO REBUILD OR DEVELOP THE ECONOMY. THE ONLY VISIBLE CHANGE THEY HAD MADE WAS TO REPLACE GVN FLAGS AND SIGNPOSTS WITH THEIR OWN. HE NOTED THAT VIET CONG CADRES ATTEMPTED TO MINIMIZE CONTACTS BETWEEN VILLAGERS AND THEIR FOREIGN GUESTS.

1. ON MAY 23 VOA CORRESPONDENT PETER COLLINS AND TWO OTHER MEDIA REPRESENTATIVES ACCOMPANIED AN ICCS TEAM ON AN INVESTIGATION OF ALLEGED US AIR ATTACKS IN THE COMMUNIST-CONTROLLED LOC NINH AREA. COLLINS' OBSERVATIONS AND COMMENTS RELATING TO THE ACTUAL INVESTIGATION ARE TREATED IN REFTEL. THIS MESSAGE DEALS SOLELY WITH HIS GENERAL IMPRESSION OF THE AREA.

2. THE GROUP, INCLUDING ICCS DELEGATES, THE THREE CORRESPONDENTS, AND TWO GVN LIAISON OFFICERS ATTACHED TO THE TWO PARTY JOINT MILITARY COMMISSION, FLEW BY HELICOPTER FROM BIEN HOA UP HIGHWAY 13 DIRECTLY TO LOC NINH. THE AIRSTRIP LOOKED ROUGH, BUT STILL USABLE FOR AIRCRAFT SUCH AS C-130'S, THOUGH IT DID NOT APPEAR THAT COMMUNIST TROOPS HAD MADE ANY IMPROVEMENTS ON THE RUNWAY. ON HAND TO MEET THE ICCS CHOPPER WAS A GROUP OF VIET CONG OFFICIALS AND NO LESS THEN 12 CHINESE- BUILT JEEPS. THE VISITORS AND THEIR ESCORTS WERE TAKEN TO WHAT WAS ONCE A FRENCH PLANTER'S HOME, BUT WHICH APPARENTLY SERVES NOW AS (VIET CONG) LOC NINH DISTRICT HEADQUARTERS, WHERE THEY MET THE DISTRICT CHIEF, PHAM TUAN THANG. ABOUT 38 YEARS OLD, THANG APPEARED TO BE AN ETHNIC CHAM OR KHMER. ACCORDING TO COLLINS HE WAS QUITE SOFT- SPOKEN AND VERY MUCH THE " POLITICAL COMMISSAR TYPE." THE GROUP HAD TEA AND BANANAS BEFORE BEGINNING ITS WORK.

3. THE VISITORS, LESS THE GVN LIAISON OFFICERS WHO WERE NOT ALLOWED TO ACCOMPANY THE INVESTIGATION (SEE REFTEL) WERE THEN TAKEN BY ROAD TO THE SITE OF THE FIRST ALLEGED VIOLATION (XU 714182), LOCATED 18 ROAD KILOMETERS -- EIGHT AIR KILOMETERS -- FROM LOC NINH, AND ABOUT SIX KILOMETERS FROM THE CAMBODIAN BORDER. TRAVELING UP HIGHWAY 13 THE JEEP CONVOY SKIRTED THE TOWN OF LOC NINH. COLLINS; VIEWING THE TOWN FROM A DISTANCE OF 500-1,000 METERS, REPORTED LITTLE VISIBLE DESTRUCTION. ALONG THE ROAD ITSELF THERE

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WERE SIX OR SEVEN HOUSES WHICH HAD BEEN DAMAGED, PROBABLY DURING THE 1972 OFFENSIVE, BUT BY AND LARGE, DESTRUCTION WAS MINIMAL. COLLINS WAS STRUCK BY THE VERY SMALL NUMBERS OF PEOPLE WHILE HE WAS IN THE AREA. HE DID NOTICE A FEW SECURITY PATROLS COMPOSED, PRESUMABLY, OF VIET CONG LOCAL FORCES DRESSED IN NON- DESCRIPT UNIFORMS. THESE HE CONTRASTED TO WHAT WERE APPARENTLY VC/ NVA REGULARS WHO WORE THE STANDARD

BAGGY FATIGUES AND PITY HELMETS.

4. ON RETURN FROM THE SITE OF THE SECOND ALLEGED VIOLATION (XU 720172) THE GROUP VISITED A HOSPITAL NEAR LOC THANH VILLAGE. THE BUILDING WAS DINGY, RUNDOWN AND UNDER- EQUIPPED BUT RELATIVELY CLEAN. THE HOSPITAL'S DIRECTOR, THANH Y, CLAIMED THAT HE HAD RECEIVED ALL OF HIS MEDICAL EDUCATION AT A " UNIVERSITY IN THE LIBERATED ZONE." HIS MAJOR COMPLAINT WAS THAT VNAF AIRCRAFT CONSTANTLY " HOVERED" OVER THE HOSPITAL DISTURBING THE SERENITY OF HIS PATIENTS. HE ALSO ALLEGED THAT AIRCRAFT HAD STRAFED AN AREA 200-300 METERS AWAY (BUT NOT THE HOSPITAL ITSELF). (THE ICCS HAD NOT BEEN ASKED TO INVESTIGATE THIS ALLEGED INCIDENT.) COLLINS NOTED THAT HE COULD NOT COMPLETELY DISCOUNT THE ALLEGATION CONCERNING " HOVERING" GVN AIRCRAFT BECAUSE HE WITNESSED PERSONALLY A VNAF 0-2 (" BIRD- DOG") ORBITING NEAR THE LOC NINH AIRFIELD.

5. ALSO, NEAR LOC THANH THE GROUP ENCOUNTERED SOME CATHOLIC NUNS STANDING OUTSIDE THEIR CHURCH. COLLINS SPOKE WITH THEM BRIEFLY AND WAS TOLD THAT A FRENCH PRIEST NAMED PERE VIET DE THICHTHIEN COMES FROM HIS HOME 18 KILOMETERS AWAY (LOCATION NOT SPECIFIED) TO CELEBRATE MASS EACH SUNDAY. COLLINS NOTED THAT THE VIET CONG CADRE PRESENT WERE UNCOMFORTABLE DURING HIS CONVERSATION WITH THE NUNS AND, HE WAS FORCED TO CUT IT SHORT.

6. UPON ARRIVAL IN LOC THANH THE VISITORS WERE TREATED TO A " SPONTANEOUS" DEMONSTRATION BY SOME 300-400 VILLAGERS WHO PRESENTED THEM WITH PETITIONS DEMANDING THAT THE ICCS FORCE THE US AND GVN TO STOP VIOLATING THE AGREEMENT.

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RSC-01 PRS-01 SS-15 USIA-12 RSR-01 /138 W
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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 2 OF 2 SAIGON 9286

COLLINS HAD THE STRONG IMPRESSION THAT THE COMMUNISTS, IN ADDITION TO EXPLOITING INTERNATIONALLY THE ALLEGED US VIOLATIONS, WANTED TO USE THE PRESENCE OF THE ICCS TO SHOW THE LOCAL POPULACE THAT THEY COULD BRING FOREIGN " NEUTRALS" IN TO PROTECT THE PEOPLE. THIS IMPRESSION WAS STRENGTHENED BY THE DISTRICT EHIEF' S PLEAS TO THE VISITORS TO SPEND THE NIGHT, PLEA FWICH WERE REJECTED BY ICCS DELEGATES.

7. ACCORDING TO COLLINS, THE MAJORITY OF THE VILLAGERS HAD NOT BEEN POLITICIZED; OLDSTERS WERE RESERVED, BLANK AND THE YOUNG, CURIOUS. WHILE CADRES SEEMED TO ENJOY A GOOD RELATIONSHIP WITH THE PEOPLE IT WAS CLEAR THAT THEY WANTED TO RESTRICT CONTACT BETWEEN THE VISITORS AND THE POPULACE

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AS MUCH AS POSSIBLE. IT WAS COLLINS' PERSONAL IMPRESSION THAT THE PEOPLE RESPONDED MUCH MORE OUT OF FEAR (OR HABIT) THAN OUT OF IDENTIFICATION WITH THE CADRES' OR THE LOCAL REGIME. UPON DEPARTURE FROM LOC THANH THE VISITORS WERE CHEERED BY THE VILLAGERS WHO HAD LINED UP ON EITHER SIDE OF THE ROAD TO SEE THEM OFF.

8. THE LOCAL ECONOMY WAS, ACCORDING TO COLLINS, IN A STATE OF GENERAL DECAY. APPERANCES INDICATED THAT THE COMMUNISTS HAD MADE LITTLE OR NO EFFORT TO REBUILD OR DEVELOP THE AREA SINCE THE CEASEFIRE. WHAT FEW PEOPLE HE SAW APPEARED POOR AND WERE SHABBILY DRESSED. NOT ONLY WERE THERE NO SIGNS OF COLLECTIVIZATION, WHAT CULTIVATION HE NOTICED LOOKED COMPLETELY HAPHAZARD. IN LOC THAN VILLAGE THERE WERE A NUMBER OF SMALL RETAIL SHOPS BUT FROM THE ROAD THEY APPEARED VERY POORLY STOCKED. HE NOTED JUST ONE RESTAURANT OPEN FOR BUSINESS.

9. THE ONLY INDUSTRY COLLINS NOTED WAS A SAWMILL WHICH APPARENTLY PROCESSED LOGS ABANDONED ALONG THE HIGHWAY WHEN GVN FORCES RETREATED LAST YEAR. COLLINS OBSERVED THREE LOG TRUCKS (NONE LOADED) WHICH HAD BEEN RESCUED FROM VARIOUS

STATES OF DISREPAIR AND PRESSED INTO SERVICE. THE ONLY OTHER VEHICLES HE SAW WERE THE JEEPS IN WHICH HIS GROUP WAS RIDING, 10-15 BICYCLES AND A COUPLE OF HONDAS.

10. IN SUM, SAID COLLINS, IT APPEARED THAT THE VIET CONG HAD SIMPLY INTERPOSED THEIR OWN ADMINISTRATION FOR THAT OF THE GVN. FAR FROM ATTEMPTING TO IMPROVE THE LOT OF THE AREA' S RESIDENTS, THE COMMUNISTS HAD ALLOWED FURTHER DETERIORATION. THE ONLY SIGNIFICANT CHANGE MADE WAS THE REPLACEMENT OF GVN FLAGS AND SIGNS WITH THOSE OF THE COMMUNISTS.

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